

WITCH HUNTING AND THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

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The word “witch” means a person, now especially a woman, who professes or is supposed to practice magic, especially black magic or the black art. It can also mean a female magician or sorceress and a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and thereby able to perform supernatural acts. The performance of such acts is what we know and understand as “witchcraft”.

The Christian concept of witchcraft as a sin has a long history. When the Church gradually began to build its beliefs and laws based on the Bible, it incorporated the idea that supernatural power was meant to belong to God alone. Hence, it considered any kind of witchcraft as a rebellion against God’s biblical rules. Consequently witchcraft became one of the most horrible sins one could be accused of and its punishment too was also equally gruesome.

Actually the term “witch hunting” had its origin in medieval Europe. Literally, the word meant hunting for witches. From the 14th to the 15th century, a witch hunting epidemic prevailed

in Europe, and many thousands of innocent people were tortured and executed in fanatical and hysterical persecution. Because of their ignorance, fear, intolerance and dogmatism, thousands of human beings lost their lives. The majority of the victims were women as the clergy thought them to be more open to the Devil's influence than men. However, thousands of men and even children were killed too. Many of the victims were lynched by angry mobs, while others were ceremoniously executed in church-approved public gatherings by hanging, decapitation; pressing with heavy stones, or burning alive at the stake.

After Europe, the fear of witches and witchcraft reached America when the first English settlers took it to their new colonies. In 1692, a series of notorious witch trials took place in Salem, Massachusetts. In all twenty seven people were tried and convicted. Of these, nineteen were hanged and one man was pressed with stones. The special court imprisoned about one hundred and fifty more. The witch hunt was brought to a halt and those imprisoned were freed in 1693. Fortunately, the fear of being attacked by evil, devil-worshipping, human-sacrificing witches has declined in the Western world with the evolution of society. Nowadays most Western people are more educated and less vulnerable to superstition and religious and fundamentalism than their old European ancestors.

But unfortunately enough, the horrifying menace of witch hunting reveals its ugly face every now and then in India, particularly in its North Eastern region. In spite of the tremendous progress in science and technology, education and social awareness, we are shocked to hear about cases of witch hunting almost every day. Most people think that illiteracy, superstitious beliefs and mass ignorance are the chief causes of such barbaric, inhuman and dastardly acts. But the amazing fact is that these are not the only and, sometimes even, the actual reasons.

If one observes carefully, one will find that most of the perpetrators of the crimes are motivated and propelled by the greed for land, property and revenge. Again it is often noticed that the quacks who fail to save the ailing persons are usually victims of their family's revenge. In this connection we would like to mention that our findings and observations will solely be based on the witch hunting related cases recorded in Assam. It would be worthwhile to point out that the Assam State Commission for Women is not happy at all with the police inaction in most of the cases related to witch hunting. Along with this, students, women activists and social workers in the backward North Eastern States are deeply concerned over the increasing killings in some remote areas of Assam. They are apprehensive that the social menace of witch hunting will soon spread to the other states as the same factors and illiteracy are prevalent in the entire region.

But what is causing concern among them is that in the past, the villagers used to banish men women branded as witches from their respective villages. However, from the early 1990's, the villagers had started killing these witches and most of their victims are women.

It is interesting to note that the entire region of Assam is worse-hit by this superstitious practice. Only a close examination reveals that the perpetrators of this crime were actually motivated by their petty, selfish and vested interests like greed for land, property and revenge. According to the police, the prime accused persons are those who stand to gain at the branded witches. Another startling fact is that witch killings are reported mostly in the monsoon season due to the outbreak of several deadly diseases. When an ailing person could not be saved despite administering herbal concoctions, the quacks and "shamans" are branded and killed in revenge by the family members.

Unfortunately enough, the police claim of having arrested the criminals has not served as a deterrent since there are increasing instances of killings. As such many non-governmental organizations are mulling over the possibility of launching massive awareness campaigns in some of the North Eastern States. For instance, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), an organization of the tribal students, has launched an awareness programme among the villagers. As a result of this, during the campaign launched from 2004, at least forty-five persons, who were earlier banished from their respective villages after being branded as witches, had been rehabilitated. But sadly enough, the government has not extended a helping hand towards the rehabilitation of these persons. Besides, no financial solarium is given to the bereaved family members of the slain witches.

Deeply troubled by such indifferent attitudes of the local government and the police authorities, several NGOs have made a public appeal to condemn witch hunting and take a stance against the social evil. NGOs, which include North East Network, Assam Mahila Samata Society, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Sadou Asom Pragatisheel Nari Santha, Women in Governance (WinG) and New.NET, request the public as well as the concerned authorities to support their appeal for the greater good of our society. The appeal demanded that witch hunting be recognized as a shameful act and a gross violation of an individual's right to life of dignity and security, to recognize women as a risk group and most vulnerable in witch-hunting which also encourages mitigation and displacement and finally into trafficking sexual abuse. The NGOs also mentioned the need to bring up a State policy to combat the discriminatory and harmful practice of witch hunting and associated violence against women. Along with this the NGOs sought immediate

rescue of all the family members and provision for the necessary protection and social reintegration.

One praiseworthy step taken by the State police is that it had decided to join hands with the State Women Commission and other voluntary organizations to combat the menace of witch hunting in Assam. Assam police, in 2001, started Project Prahari following the death of five persons in the name of witch hunting in an under developed village called Thaigarguri in Kokrajhar district.

It is clear, therefore, that the police want to expand their programme and fight the superstition more effectively. This was disclosed by the then Additional Director General of Assam Police, Kula Saikia. Social activists and experts during a consultation advocated a special legislation and State action plan to deal with witch hunting which was showing no signs of relenting even as the state boasts of ushering in development in many fronts. In this regard Assam State Women Commission Chairperson Mridul Saharia said that the superstition of witch hunting was mostly prevalent in Kamrup (Rural), Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baska, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Karbi Anglong districts.

Over fifty civil societies and many social activists in Assam have jointly demanded National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) should be involved in fighting the superstition of witch hunting. The Sadou Asom Bodo Samaj has demanded formulation of a strict law to deal with witch hunting killings of Bodo inhabited areas and other areas of Assam. The different voluntary organizations have expressed deep concern over the fact that nearly two to three hundreds of people lose their lives in the state every year in incidents of witch hunting.

And it is here that the various NGOs and voluntary organizations can play a vital role in removing the plague of

witch hunting. They can do so by creating a mass awareness among the people living in the backward areas in ways such as by organizing educational camps and thereby sensitizing them about the evils of the menace. They can also, in the process, do away with the different types of misconceptions and myths that people generally associate with witch hunting. Again they can help the local people to constitute some sort of patrol and security (defence) group which can keep an alert eye and check the harmful activities of such people who indulge themselves in witch hunting.

In the award winning documentary “The Great Indian Witch Hunt” shown in the National Geographic channel, it was brought to light that despite the brilliant success of initiatives like Project Prahari, it has not received due support from the government of Assam to spread it state-wide and eradicate superstitions and social evils. It is not known how much the NGOs are doing in this regard. The role of NGOs should be based on total commitment in synchronization with government efforts. Political lobbies as well as vested interests should not be used to satisfy their narrow interests by glamorizing the position of witch-doctors among tribal communities. Various science societies can use the concept of *vigyan yatra* to educate the people in the remote villages that witches do not exist on earth. If one has any disease, one should go to the doctor in the nearest hospital.

Reference

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